An American tradition revisited

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There are ample signs that the true bedrock of American mass culture has been at last revealed and is achieving widespread recognition.

Witness, for example, the meteoric rise of such folk heroes, super-patriots, and cultural ur-people as Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, Captain America; Thor, Flame, The Thing, Dr. Strange, and of course that tragic Werther-figure, enervate Rittmeister Hans von Hammer, the “hammer of death.”

Final confirmation of this appreciation of the mythic element in culture formation has come with the reappearance of the most renowned pair of goings ever to grace a comic book—Batman and his acolyte, Robin. The Arcay Theatre, realizing that minor deities may come and go, but religion goes on forever, has devoutly undertaken the sequential showing of the Batman serials, vintage 1935 or so.

Sad Schizophrenic

If the third episode of the series, shown last weekend, is at all representative, the eye has not seen, nor the ear yet heard, the equal of the exploits of the sad schizophrenic devil who calls himself Batman.

Return with us now to Gotham City, where the Wizard, crime king and technological weaponsmaster, has set his henchmen about the task of hijacking from a train the only extant shipment of X-90, the powerful new experimental explosive. We see the thugs, mattress-shouldered and drooly of countenance, padding along the tops of box cars on the speeding train. Suddenly, from nowhere, Batman, with pointy wings, padded paunch, and card-board nose, appears to do battle. Forms grapple and wham! Batman goes over the side.

Train Stopper

Cut to the Wizard’s den, where he flips a switch that, via some as yet unknown means of remote control, eliminates the friction between rails and drive wheels of the train. The train grinds to a standstill. Fearful criminals start loading X-90 into their getaway car. Wait! Batman drops down among them, battling guns with his gauntleted fists. Once again, however, a sneaky gangster wallops him from behind.

Meanwhile Robin, all slicked up for inspection with several quarts of Wildroot adsorbed into his greasy curls, arrives in—it can’t be, but it is—the Batmobile.

The Metamorphosis

The Batmobile, incidentally, has undergone a curious transformation. Instead of the ominous finned monster so familiar to comic fans, it is (was) a shiny sleek convertible. Baby, you sold out to Hollywood;

Robin, it turns out, is a candy when it comes to dealing out righteous punishment with his hammering fists; we might go so far as to say he has a glass jaw. One roundhouse swing from an all-too-familiar heavy (fifteen years later this guy will be a professional outlaw in Rex Allen films), and Robin eats dirt.

Wake up, you guardians of Gotham City, Get those guys. Roar, and we’re off to a classic motor chase, with screeching wheels and windshields spider-webbed by shots from impossible angles. Hah, the Batmobile is gaining and . . . the Wizard steps in with another remote whammy which spins the trusty crimefighters into a ditch.

Foiled Again

Cut to the Wizard’s den, where we witness a standard “You fools! You got the box of explosives, but what about the box of special detonators, without which X-90 is worthless? Idiots!” Gosh, boss . . .

In the better interests of crime, the Wizard and his gang pinch the inventor of the special detonators (who is conveniently registered in a nearby hotel) and force him to divulge the location of said devices.

Meanwhile, back in the abode of Bruce Wayne, we see the wealthy, smoking-jacket socialite being interviewed by a cub reporter about the crime wave. Wayne, we immediately intuit, is cutting a social swath as a civilian. Enter the butler with tea service. (No kidding)

Fiery Cross

Some subtle urge carries him to the window where he peeps out from behind the curtain and sees emblazoned on the clouds . . . what? A cross? Francis X. Bushman? The face of Bernard Mergendiefer? No, none of these trifles, but, rather, the famed BATSIGNAL. ‘Swounds. Butler oozes over to Wayne, gives a sly, faithful-retainer nod of the head, and pads away. OK, now how is Wayne going to exit gracefully? Take a tip from the man: “Miss, this news you have brought has upset me terribly so that I must go take my vitamins. You will excuse me,” Choice.

Cut to—yes—the BATCAVE, where greasy ol’ Robin is polishing up the calky ol’ Batmobile. Batman (Bruce Wayne, you dunnerheads) appears in full regalia and Robin, ever master of the situation, leaves Batman speechless and drooling with a brilliant “What’s up, chief?”

Too Late

Informed by phone of the probable outcome of the kidnapping, the intrepid duo speed off to the local electronics plant to protect the detonators.

Blust. Too late. The bad ‘uns, in an incredible display ofelan, savoir-faire, wiles, and every other sort of cool, drive into the plant in a stolen truck, load the detonators, and drive out un molested. Batman and Robin see them escaping and give chase. Gunshots, slam, bang. Go hoss. Batmobile gaining in the distance. Truck, on mountain curve, stops behind promontory; we can see a foul plan emerging. Will Batman enter the trap unawares?

Not if the writers can help it. He stops the car (why?), climbs over the promontory, sizes up the situation, and yip-pay, vaults down the crooks. Like a good Cooper Indian, he misses them all.

Cliff-hanger

A nasty fight transpires. Batman, the faithful moviegoer readily sees, is out of shape. He’s up. He’s down. He’s up. A crook—fight fair, scoundrel—attacks him with a tire tool. They struggle on the brink of a chasm. Batman seizes the iron bar, shoves away his assailant, and is apparently victorious.

But not so fast. The Wizard, from his far-off hideaway, has observed all. He flips a switch, and zap! the bar Batman holds over his head is suddenly charged with uncountable electron volts (see all the pretty coronae, children). Nonplussed by this unforeseen development, Batman topples over the cliff. Finis Episode Three.

The series has already started, but those wishing to make a decision for Batman are not too late. In the best interests of pop culture faddists everywhere, the “Alay must be commended. Iron Man, after all, is at best a comic book character. Batman in the movies provides the tangible personification of an ideal. Queue up for Episode Four.